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THE PERFORMANCE OF POLITICAL DUTIES

THE GREAT NEED OF THE PRESENT DAY.

ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

LITERARY SOCIETIES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA,
AT CHAPEL HILL, JUNE 6TH, 1883,

BY HON. THOMAS C. MANNING, LL. D.

*Gentlemen of the Dialectic
and Philanthropic Societies,
Ladies and Gentlemen:—*

I wish to speak to you to-day on a practical subject—the duties of citizenship: There can be no greater mistake than to suppose that political duties are confined to one class of citizens, or that a proper and diligent performance of them is the special obligation of those who seek or occupy public place. There has grown up in our country a sentiment that active participation in public affairs implies in some sort a degradation of one's personality, and it seems to be assumed that the consecration of a man's life to the public service is a waste of resources that would be better employed in other channels of activity. The consequence is that politics

as a science and a pursuit has been separated from its higher functions, and has come to mean something ignoble and unworthy of men who are scholarly, pure, and bent upon the attainment of high and noble ends.

And yet no one knows better than the scholar that no country has ever attained exalted rank among the nations except through the services of its great men, and the greatness of its men has consisted in the dedication of themselves to their country's service—in their abnegation of self, their repudiation of personal aims, and the consecration of their lives to the promotion of the public welfare.

Do not let us fall into the error of supposing that the ancients had a monopoly of civic virtue, or that

the world ceases to produce men equal to any in the past, as well fitted as they to the conduct of affairs, as well able to bear the burdens of State, as well adapted to the circumstances of their time as those whose names are written on historic rolls and whose careers are subjects of our study, our admiration and our imitation. It is true that nations fail to reproduce great characters, but it is equally true that such bareness marks unmistakably a nation's decadence, and indicates its not remote extinction.

But great men are only a product of a nation's force, the evolution from its active qualities of intelligence, elevation of character, noble purpose, lofty aspiration. There are great occasions—crises in a nation's history—when one man steps out as it were from the womb of time and impresses himself upon the nation's character, and draws upward to himself the body of his fellow-men, raises them to the higher plane whereon he moves. But as a general thing great men are the legitimate offspring of the time in which they live, and are moulded by the forces at work within the people that has produced them.

We should be very loth to admit that the galaxy of men who crowned the work of our revolution by establishing the government, under which we have lived

so happily and have thrived so well, were inferior to any of a preceeding age. We are in the habit of referring to the age in which they lived and moved as the halcyon days of the Republic, and we depreciate the present and accuse our own times of depravity and self seeking. If the charge be well founded, it behooves us to apply a remedy, and therefore I know of no subject more worthy of your attention right now than the ascertainment of the political duties of the present hour. It will of course be understood that I am speaking of politics not in a partism sense, and that I shall use the word democracy not in its restricted meaning as designating a party, but as expressing that system, or set of principles, which has as its basis the cardinal dogma that the people is the source of all political power, and its well being the chief end and aim of government.

Democracy constructs its system upon the theory that the people are pure, that they know their wants, and will not permit the forms of government to be applied to other purposes than their benefit. Details are worked out in different ways according to the genius and temper of different peoples, influenced by present needs and affected in a great degree by their previous histories. But the underlying principle per-

meates the whole system, that the people govern themselves, and when a government constructed on that principle becomes corrupt, it must needs be that the people have become corrupt long before, or that they have grown indifferent. And the consequences are equally pernicious whether the corruption of the government proceeds from the one cause or the other. It is not possible for us to admit that corruption has become so widespread that it has infected the whole body of our people. There is not sufficient ground for such assumption, but the decay of public purity is so universally admitted, and the modes of political action are so generally condemned as denoting political depravity, that it has grown into an axiom that political morals have a different code from personal morals, and that a public man may do in the domain of statesmanship what he would refuse to do in the governance of his private life.

Now it is not my purpose to enter the field of disputation, and endeavor to demonstrate the unsoundness of this theory. I do not think it obtains among the masses, nor that any public man of America would be willing to own that he accepted it as a rule for his own guidance.

The old-world theory that governments are instituted for the

benefit of the governors, whose main duty is to keep the governed in subjection, was exploded with terrific violence by the French Revolution. That followed close upon the struggle made upon our own soil. No doubt the successful assertion made here of the democratic principle was the spark that kindled that conflagration. But how different the methods of the two peoples, and how different the results! Here an orderly, practical working out of the principle to its legitimate results! There a fierce and rampant iconoclasm which destroyed for the mere sake of destroying. Here a systematic construction of a political edifice, symmetrical and well arranged, thoroughly adapted to its purpose. There a congeries of ill-digested theories, the vain attempt of idealists to satisfy practical wants by brilliant and imposing generalizations. Here all good common sense. There all sound and fury, signifying nothing.

A century has passed by and the same contrast with some of its outlines perhaps a little faded, confronts the world to-day. France again boasts a republic without really understanding what the word means, and with no conception of that orderly and well regulated liberty which is now so completely domesticated here that it seems as if it were an instinct.

Of course we owe our political conceptions in some degree to race. Enthusiastic youth is apt to suppose that America is the birthplace of liberty, and Fourth of July orators have told us with endless iteration that but for our revolt of the last century the world would yet be sunk in lethargy and the people be bound even now with chains. No American having the just pride in his country that he should have, would disparage the splendid achievements of those whom with loving homage we call the fathers of our country, but the spirit of liberty was implanted in us by an ancestry that extended back to a period before the first immigrant turned his face hitherward, and it grew and strengthened until it found here opportunity for its full development into that stately tree underneath whose branches we sit to-day. How crude our first conceptions were is manifest from the spirit which prompted the first enactments of some of our infant colonies. The motive for immigration at first was not so much freedom of political action as of religious belief, but no sooner had they attained this boon for themselves than they proceeded to deprive every one else of it. Religious liberty with them meant liberty to believe what they taught, and though we smile at this inconsistency, and recognize

how illogical were these good people, I am afraid we have even at this day some leaven of that sturdy refusal to accord to every one the right to follow wheresoever his convictions lead him in that field of inquiry.

The spread of democratic ideas throughout the world during the century has been marvelous, and is the central fact in modern civilization and modern government. It does not necessarily follow that they necessitate a government conformable in name to them. Their influence silently changes the practical working of government, though the name of and fact of monarchy remains. Great Britain is a conspicuous example of the existence of a republic in fact under a monarchy in name. The fine phrase of M. Thiers aptly and pithily expresses the fact and theory—the Queen reigns but does not govern. That liberty-loving and sensible people has gradually and patiently evolved a system which accomplishes in an orderly way what no other nation has ever done in a like degree—the immediate realization of the people's will, so as to effect an instant change in the whole personnel and policy of the government, whenever the people's body—the Commons' House—so declare.

The Premier, with his whole body of colleagues, must bow be-

fore an adverse vote of the Commons, if given upon a cabinet question, and give place to the party that has overthrown him. The Commons has become so completely the governing power that it is now an accepted constitutional principle that the other House must agree with it upon any vital measure. Theoretically the Lords is a co-equal branch of the legislature, and does refuse to concur in bills that are not regarded as of supreme importance, but on all matters of sufficient gravity to awaken the public conscience and interest, the Lords must give way. And this is not from any lack of ability. The debaters in the Lords upon any great occasion—the field-nights of the session—will not lose by comparison with the Commons, even when the Commons is at its best.

We should be appalled if any one should advance the theory that our Senate ought to exercise only nominal functions, and that its duty was to yield its own convictions to those of the other branch of Congress. And nothing better illustrates the inability of Frenchmen to comprehend the nature of a republic governed by a fixed law than the attempt of Gambetta to abolish the French senate because it would not adopt his project for changing the electoral law. Centralized authority,

as the governing power, the autocracy of a single will, is the antipodal conception to government by the will of the nation.

The first duty of the men of the present day is to elevate the tone of public morals, to infuse into the people a higher sense of political obligations, to dethrone venality, and to teach the coming generation that they should no more tolerate political than personal immorality, and that a man who is not worthy of social respect does not deserve political elevation. This cannot be accomplished without the aid of the cultivated intellect of the nation coming to the rescue, and the accomplishment of it cannot be omitted without danger to the institutions under which we profess to be proud to live. And this is my reason and my excuse for departing from the usual course of selecting literary themes for such an occasion as this, and preferring to obtrude upon your consideration a great and absorbing practical question that ought to receive the well considered attention of scholars, not less than of those who are concerned more immediately with the performance of political functions.

The basis of all high character is honesty—honesty in the larger sense of the word—not only honesty in that sense which means payment of monetary obligations,

though that is the foundation of honesty in all other things, but straight-forwardness in action, sincerity in thought and speech, purity of motive, all of which bring elevation of character. You at once admit that he who is groveling in his aims, insincere in his purposes, and dishonest in his dealings, is not worthy of association in the every-day concerns of life. Why should you tolerate such characteristics in him who is to fill places of honor, power and responsibility ?

The masses receive tone and bias from those who are on a higher plane than themselves. Corruption never commences below and proceeds thence upwards. The upper strata of society takes the infection first, and the poison diffuses through that layer of the organism before it penetrates the vitals of the body politic. The cure must be applied where the disease originated, and the healthy sentiment of those who first gave way to the improper tendency must first be restored before any perceptible impression can be made on those who receive instead of originating ideas.

That there is a public and general recognition of decadence in public morals is apparent from the fact that accusations against public men receive immediate credence. The belief that they will and do act from corrupt or

selfish motives is so deeply seated that the public conscience, instead of being surprised at the charge of venality, accepts it as true without waiting for proof of it. It seems, so to speak, natural that they should be swayed by personal and unworthy motives, and therefore when any charge of a specific act is made, the public jumps to the conclusion that it is true. Much of this must be laid to the account of human nature. It is very sad to know that the appetite for scandal is so keenly witted that men more readily believe ill of their fellows than good. It is so delightful for those below to pull down those that are above. Our self complacency is gratified in believing that others are no better than ourselves, and there seems to be implanted in us a distrust of apparent qualities in others that separate them from ourselves by the possession of nobler instincts and aspirations than we feel in our own breasts. But after giving due weight to this tendency there is in the present proneness to believe ill of those who conduct public affairs a manifestation of conviction that it is their normal condition.

And after all there is the humiliating consciousness that there is foundation for this distrust, and that the actual conduct of affairs is not what it should be. It will not do to say that the American

people, with its practical aptitudes, its thorough convictions has found the solution of difficulties in government better than any other, and that its own country and its own government is immeasurably superior to every other, can find no remedy for such a condition of affairs. Americans have a supreme confidence in themselves. They believe they are equal to any emergency. Foreigners formerly sneered at this quality, but they have at length come to recognize there is reason for it. Surely we not intend to admit that there is one difficulty we cannot surmount—one evil we cannot reform—and that difficulty in the very domain where we arrogate to ourselves most knowledge and the clearest conceptions—the domain of government.

Laxity in attention to public affairs has become the one besetting sin of our people. Our government was founded on the theory that when a people have the right to govern themselves they would neglect no act essential to the exercise of that right, but what is the fact? From one end of the country to the other the fact is proclaimed that a large portion of the intelligence and higher culture of the nation ostentatiously eschew politics, and will have nothing to do with it. Now politics in one sense is sufficiently repulsive to explain their

conduct, but I have already said I am not using the term in the ordinary sense. I am not thinking or speaking of it in any other sense than that intelligent interest which I insist every man in a republican country should take in the measures that are proposed for its government. It is undeniable that when one wishes to belittle another and to signify that one is making a trade of public life, he is stigmatized as a politician. I have nothing to say in deprecation of the epithet or of its application. The point I am trying to make is that the great body of the people ought to prevent any one from making politics a trade, and ought to take such interest in public affairs, and personally demonstrate that interest by action as to foil and thwart the designs of those who degrade politics into a trade. Now the great body of the people will not act until moved, and there are two forces to move them. One is the self-seeking element whose purposes are selfish. The other is the patriotic element whose purposes are the public good, and if this last element is quiescent, apathetic and indifferent, the other and base motive power, must predominate and produce bad government.

Probably the greatest danger that menaces the working of Republican institutions is the consolidation of the influence of the

money power. Concentrated wealth is the dynasty of modern States. Like all dynasties it seeks to attract power to itself and when suffrage is universal, the influence of wealth upon the electorate is as pernicious as it is universal. Of course it cloaks its designs under specious pretences. It blatantly proclaims popular benefits to be its aim, and by seducing the people into belief into devotion to its cause make them the unconscious abettors of the mischiefs it inflicts. Under other systems there are counteracting influences which modify its power but in a republican government the power of the plutocracy has nothing to oppose it but intelligence and patriotism, and when those possessing these qualities abstain from participation in public affairs, there is no check to the domination of wealth.

You will understand I am not here speaking of wealth as the possession of an individual, but the concentration of all the power of accumulated wealth to effect the object of its own aggrandizement, and to secure political power. We see what effects it produces even when wielded by an individual. The acquisition of individual fortunes has accomplished results in the last decade at which the nation would have stood aghast so recently as twenty-five years ago. Most Ameri-

cans sneer at what they are pleased to call the effete governments of the old world, wherein the possession of wealth with other influences, has created caste and conferred exceptional privileges upon those possessing it. Our school books teach our children to scorn the constitution of the House of Lords in Great Britain, which is recruited alone from men who have rendered distinguished services to their country, or have in some way displayed conspicuous personal merits, while before our own eyes the body in our governmental structure that corresponds to that House contains members whose sole claim to that position and sole means to attain it is their stupendous wealth. New States are raised to the dignity of co-equal sovereignties, while they are in fact close boroughs that some hitherto unknown lucky adventurer carries in his pocket to return him as Senator. But even this is a minor phase of the evil, and not the one I have in mind.

Diffused wealth elevates States and peoples. It extends education produces refinement, multiplies comforts, and enhances the pleasures of life. Concentrated wealth creates castes and subordinates everything unto itself, and when it operates upon the electoral body, and corrupts and debases the excise of the electoral func-

tion, purity of government is at an end. What security is there for popular rights, or for the promotion of the general welfare, when an influence hostile to them permeates the whole structure of government.

Seeing the evil influences that have had full sway in late years, some have despaired of the Republic. They have witnessed corruption rampant and acknowledged; evil practices confessed without shame, practices more evil still charged with a good show of proof and a public looking on, not with stupefaction, but as if such things might be and were expected. But it is not in this age, nor by a people which has tried the experiment, that confidence in the perpetuity of republican institutions is to be destroyed by evanescent difficulties. While representative government is extending its sway, and its principles are finding lodgment in the minds and convictions of nations that have never tried it or tried it imperfectly, it is not here, their birthplace and home, that the experiment will be admitted to be a failure. Nor is there anything in the present outlook, unpromising as it is in many respects, to dishearten him whose faith has been temporarily disturbed. There is a manifest re-awakening of the public conscience, and appearance of a de-

sire to relegate those who have been conspicuous in employing nefarious methods to the obscurity from which they should never have emerged?

The expansion of liberal ideas during our century has been indeed marvelous. Old modes of thought seem to have perished. Conceptions of the universe, of our planet as a part of it, of man as the highest form of intelligence upon it, and his relations to his fellow-man and to the society of which he forms part, have been illuminated by the discoveries of science, the speculations of philosophers, and the disquisitions of humanitarians. Inquiries into the science of government have kept pace with these explorations of other fields, and the dogma with which our people started as a basis has gradually and almost imperceptibly unfolded itself among modern peoples. Representative institutions are the only possible government of the future. This is conspicuously true of those nations that belong to the Teutonic race, and high above all is it true of the english-speaking people. The germ of free popular government has expanded among them with greater rapidity than any other. They appear to seize, intuitively its true spirit, and to work out the theory in a more practical and substantial form than any other. How different their reduction into prac-

tice of simple general principles from the vagaries of speculative theorists of other races. Compare the noble structure of our constitution with the glittering systems that the Abbe Sieyes formulated. Observe the good sense, the adaption of means to ends, the gradual incorporation in the English constitution of the principles of popular freedom while retaining old forms. And what a future does it unfold for coming generations. The despairing exclamation of Alexander sighing for more worlds to conquer finds no echo in the hearts of English-speaking peoples. Their own daring spirit of adventure finds new worlds. They spread out into the uttermost corners of the earth, fix themselves irrevocably upon foreign soil and subdue nations unto themselves, or so insinuate their modes of thought and principles of action in them that they are insensibly dominated by English ideas, and become one in that great family of English peoples that to all appearance seems destined to subdue the globe.

To us, more perhaps than to any other nation, are public virtues and political education necessary—necessary not only to the beneficent operation but to the actual existence of our institutions. In other nations the stability of the existing order is

so guaranteed that fluctuations of popular sentiment do not immediately or radically effect it. But with us, where all institutional existence depends for perpetuation on the continuance of popular consent, the influences which control that consent inevitably attract our highest solicitude. Those influences, expressed in general terms, are right feeling and right thinking, and hence the prime necessity of our civil life is the education of the public conscience and the public mind in civil affairs.

The great practical question therefore which this necessity imposes on us for solution is what is the best method of accomplishing the end in view. Much has been accomplished in that direction by the utterances of unpartisan journals, by political debates and essays, and by the writings of great publicists. But much more remains to be done, and what remains cannot be done by fugative paragraphs, occasional debates and didactic tomes. The undertaking is vast and necessitates conscientious, patient and persistent labor. Institutions of learning are therefore the most effective agencies for the promotion of this good work. Right here in our schools and colleges must be laid the basis of our political regeneration and purification. In the school day season of life the

mental and emotional structure has its highest malleability, and its highest susceptibility of permanent impression. We find then and there, as we never again find, the organization, the methods, the appliances and the surroundings necessary to the genesis of right feeling and right thinking. In that early community alone is it practicable to carry on that harmonious cultivation of mind and heart necessary to full and complete education. There alone is it practicable to conjoin virtuous action with the inculcation of virtuous maxims, and that leads up to the formation of those virtuous habits which are our best assurances of correct conduct. Here then, I reiterate, we must lay the foundation of knowledge and of right principle in respect to political obligation which is the condition precedent of a purer code of political ethics.

I mention therefore as a practical corollary from this proposition that a chair of political philosophy should be as permanent a feature in the curriculum of American colleges as a chair of natural philosophy or of moral philosophy. We have taught in all of our colleges man's duty to God and to his fellow man, but our schools contain no provision whatever for tuition upon the wide range of duties growing out of men's political relations with

each other and with the State. The more we reflect upon it the more astonishing the hiatus becomes. Great institutions, presumably embodying the culture, the intelligence and conservatory wisdom of the country, tender to the Republic as their *eleves*, fitted for the great functions of life, men who are ignorant of one of the most pregnant of those functions—men armed with the elective franchise and thus entrusted with the destinies of the nation, who are wholly untaught in the fundamental duties of citizenship.

This is a crying and danger breeding omission, and becomes more and more a subject of solicitous thought as our population grows denser and as the struggle for existence becomes more desperate, while the elective franchise has been extended to its utmost limit, and ignorance of civic obligation is magnified into a standing menace and peril.

It does not consist with the scheme or scope of this address to discuss any particular system which might be the special subject of instruction in the domain of political philosophy, and yet there is one which is so general in its nature, and so pervading in its importance that I must advert to it. It is the danger to constitutional government that comes from a rampant development of the democratical idea. If there is

one inculcation, of experience which may be assumed as an absolute postulate, it is that supreme power cannot be safely lodged exclusively in the hands of the one, the few or the many. Neither King nor aristocracy nor majority alone therefore can be trusted with unchecked power. Each must be a check upon the other. There must be checks and balances. The founders of our republic clearly understood this. Their debates in the great convention of 1789 attest it. Never for a moment were they misled by the fatal impiety and falsity of the utterance that the voice of the people is the voice of God. They were not so ignorant of human nature, or of the teachings of the past as to expect justice from the reign of unfettered majorities any more than from the rule of a single absolute despot. They were not such shallow optimists as to believe that by merely conglomerating a number of imperfect and simple units they could educe a perfect and sinless aggregate. On the contrary they knew that the evil tendencies of men were intensified rather than weakened by aggregation, and that they required even stronger restraints in the mass than as individuals. They would not therefore trust their country to the unbridled sway of many erring men, and instead of advocating the absolute rule of

majorities they combatted it, and their keen ears detected more of satanic than of divine refrain in the *vox populi* dogma that captivates by its sonorous expression. They saw that the great and abiding peril to their plan of free government lay in the majority rule, and hence their cardinal aim was so to fashion and formulate their plan as to prevent that rule from becoming supreme and absolute. The fruit of their labors is that written instrument which we call a Constitution, and which in the perfection of its details, in the general symmetry of its whole, in the political wisdom of which it is the highest expression, there was not an exemplar, and there never can be a reproduction. There it stands in solitary majesty, its great outlines in bold relief upon the political sky, the wonder of the age that produced it, and the marvel of all political thinkers from then till now.

What we need then as a strong and immutable constituent in the faculty of every American institution of learning is a chair of political philosophy that shall have for its special functions the expounding of the practical duties of citizenship, and shall bring those duties within the sphere of moral obligation, not only teaching those duties and instructing as to their nature and sphere, but imposing their performance as a

sacred and imprescriptible debt upon the coming generations.

And this is the great practical lesson I would enforce, that the

performance of the political functions that appertain to citizens of our republic is the important duty of the hour.

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